

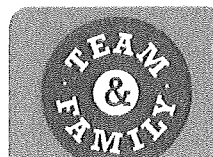
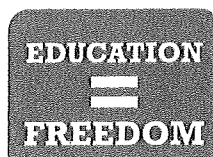


March 7, 2011

It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon to address members of the Education Committee supporting Raised Bill 1104. My name is Jeff House, and I am the principal of Achievement First Hartford Academy. We currently serve grades 5 – 7, with an enrollment of about 250 students, selected by lottery from the North End of Hartford. 98% of our students are African-American or Hispanic; 85% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Before they reached our school, only 24% of our current 7th grade students scored at or above Goal on the CMTs – 24% is an appalling #, but sadly it is also typical for students in the North End of Hartford. After less than one year in our school, 46% of this same cohort of students scored at or above Goal in March 2009. In March 2010, as 6th graders, 60% of them scored at or above Goal. I am confident that these students, who are now in 7th grade, will score even higher this month on the 2011 CMTs. And I'm sure that by the time they take the test as 8th graders they will be surpassing state averages and even creating a "reverse Achievement Gap." I am proud to say that our school is an example of an urban public school that really works.

I am really pleased that Raised Bill 1104 addresses the issue of teacher certification and embraces measures of teacher effectiveness over pure compliance, especially in the charter school context where we are all supposed to be willing to try innovative practices in the interest of students. However, I would like to ask that the Committee consider expanding this flexibility to include all school staff, including school leaders. I offer up my own story as evidence of the need for additional flexibility. I did not come to be a school principal by the traditional path. I started as a community organizer in Los Angeles, California, working to organize residents of low income neighborhoods to improve their communities. While we did some good work, I did not see life fundamentally changing for the people in the communities that I served: they remained trapped in a cycle of poverty by their inability to compete for any but the lowest-paying jobs. I came to the conclusion that education was the best way, and perhaps the only way, to break the cycle of urban poverty. I became a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. My students' came to me with achievement levels in reading and math that were consistently in the lowest quartile on national standardized tests. I struggled initially like all new teachers, but I stuck with teaching in L.A. for six years and, in my final three years, more than 90% of my students moved from being in the bottom quartile to being in the top quartile on the Stanford 9 achievement test. In 2004, I moved to Boston, and I found a job as a 6th grade math teacher at the Edward W. Brooke Charter School, a school serving a similar population of underserved urban kids on the wrong side of the Achievement Gap. While working there, my 6th grade math students posted the highest results of any students in the city of Boston.

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After three years at the school, I became the assistant principal overseeing the 5th and 6th grades. I played an integral role in helping Edward W. Brooke Charter School advance on a course to become a truly exemplary school. This past year, Edward W. Brooke's 7th and 8th graders outperformed their peers at all other schools in the entire state of Massachusetts. This is a school serving low income, minority students in Boston, taking in students by blind lottery, and it is the highest achieving middle school in the entire state of Massachusetts.

In Massachusetts and in a number of other states, charter school teachers and leaders are not required to be certified, so I was able to serve in these roles and have a big impact – but without certification. My wife is originally from Connecticut, and we decided to move here in 2007 to raise our family. I was fortunate to find Achievement First and spent a year training as a principal intern at Amistad Academy in New Haven. Between my experiences in Boston and in New Haven, I believe I was well prepared to found and lead Achievement First Hartford Academy.

Unfortunately, the Connecticut Department of Education does not share this view. For the past several years, I have tried persistently to become certified as a teacher in Connecticut and have been denied. I have passed the relevant tests, and I have the relevant experience and teacher certification in other states, but this state won't issue me a license to teach, let alone lead a school. Because I can't get certified as a Connecticut teacher, I can't even begin the process of applying for administrative certification. How can it be that, based on student outcomes, I was among the most effective teachers in California and Massachusetts and I helped to lead one of Massachusetts most effective schools, but according to the Department of Education, I am not qualified to be a teacher or leader in this state?

My struggles with the certification process are not unique. At Achievement First Hartford Academy, we have a music teacher with a PhD in Music Performance, who is licensed to teach music in Massachusetts, but who has been denied Connecticut certification. In a twist of bleak humor, the CT Department of Education has told this teacher that he must go back to school and take a particular college course to be eligible for CT certification – and this course happens to be a course that he actually *taught* while serving as a grad student at the University of Michigan. To provide a second example, we have another teacher who is certified for grades K – 6 but taught 7th and 8th grade mathematics at the Watkinson School, one of the most prestigious private schools in the Hartford area. She is a smart, talented teacher who works wonderfully with the kids at our school, and she would be the perfect candidate for the hard-to-fill 8th grade math

teacher position I have open for next year – but the Department of Education says she is not “qualified” for this position.

And now I come to my most compelling story about why teacher certification regulations must be reformed. Kendra Salvador is among the very best teachers at our school. Last year, 94% of our 6th graders scored Proficient, and 68% scored at or above Goal, on the math portion of the CMT. These numbers mean that our students, from the North End of Hartford, who two years ago scored less than 25% at goal, are now outscoring their peers across the state. We recruited her to our school because she wanted to relocate to this area, and she came highly Ms. Salvador after great success as a Teach for America Corps member in California, where she was fully certified. For the past two years, Ms. Salvador has been trying in vain to become certified in Connecticut. While others debate about how we might close the Achievement Gap, Ms. Salvador is closing it. The Department of Education sends our school threatening letters about what will happen to our school if we don’t dismiss Ms. Salvador and a handful of other teachers who are struggling to get in compliance. Ms. Salvador is the model of the kind of teacher we need more of in urban schools. She is the kind of teacher we want to recruit, develop and retain if we really care about closing the Achievement Gap for Connecticut kids. She is the kind of teacher who can truly change kids’ life outcomes. And the Department of Education thinks we should *fire* her.

Why is the Department of Education labeling teachers like Ms. Salvador and myself as unqualified and working to ensure we are removed from the positions that allow us to help kids? Shouldn’t we instead be recognized and encouraged for our work toward closing the Achievement Gap? Shouldn’t the Department of Education be taking an interest in our success with low income urban students and looking for ways to replicate it? At the very least, just allow us to continue doing this work. The propose Act Concerning Charter Schools, repealing and replacing section 10-66dd of the general statutes, would allow us, and others like us, to carry on.

Sincerely,



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